U.S Post Office and Federal Courts Building (Norfolk City Hall) 235 East Plume Street Norfolk (Independent City) VIRGINIA HABS No. VA-37

PHOTOGRAPHS

WRITTEN HISTORICAL AND DESCRIPTIVE DATA

HISTORIC AMERICAN BUILDINGS SURVEY
NATIONAL PARK SERVICE
U.S. DEPARTMENT OF THE INTERIOR
WASHINGTON, D.C. 20240

AMERICA'S CITY HALLS

Name:

U. S. Post Office and Federal Courts Building

Norfolk City Hall

Norfolk Division of Social Services

Location:

235 East Plume Street Norfolk, Virginia

Present Owner:

City of Norfolk; Tobacco Company Enterprises of Richmond has a development contract to purchase.

Present Occupant:

Vacant

Present Use:

Vacant; proposed for reuse as a restaurant.

Significance: During the period 1880 to 1917, Norfolk emerged as an international port, witnessing a doubling of its population and land area. An extensive building boom occurred in the city center as well as in the surrounding county. As a direct consequence of this activity, the U. S. Government commissioned the firm of Wyatt and Nolting to design a new building for the city's post office and federal courts. That architectural firm was responsible for a number of architectural landmarks in Baltimore and in the Washington, D. C. area.

Norfolk's Old City Hall, formerly the U.S. Post Office and Federal Courts Building, stands as an important and rare example of Neo-Palladian Revival. Neo-Palladianism draws upon the architecture of Palladio and his followers for its composition and detailing. The style, while popular in Europe at the end of the 19th Century, was overshadowed in the U.S. by the Greek-and Roman-influenced Neoclassical Revival.

PART I: HISTORICAL INFORMATION

PHYSICAL HISTORY (PART A)

- 1. Date of Erection: 1899-1900
- 2. Architect: The U. S. Post Office and Courthouse, later Norfolk's City Hall, was designed by the Baltimore architectural firm of James B. N. Wyatt and William G. Nolting. (A copy of the original set of drawings for the building, signed by Wyatt and Nolting, is available at the Department of Public Works, Norfolk.)

Wyatt and Nolting brought to the project diverse architectural backgrounds. William G. Nolting was born in Baltimore and educated in Richmond, where he apprenticed under Albert Lybrock. Later, he moved to Washington, D. C., and continued his training under William Poindexter, a Richmond native. He returned to Baltimore in 1887 and formed a partnership with James B. Wyatt, which lasted until 1925. James B. Wyatt was a native of Baltimore and was

graduated from Harvard University in 1870. He studied architecture both at M.I.T. and the Ecole Des Beaux Arts in Paris. Upon returning to Baltimore, he entered into practice with Joseph Sperry and later with William G. Nolting.

Among the outstanding firms in the city of Baltimore in this period, Wyatt and Nolting were responsible for such important Baltimore landmarks as the Keyser Building, the Baltimore Courthouse (1896-1899), the Fifth Regiment Armory (1902), the Garrett Office Building (1913) and the Federal Land Bank Building (1923). They also designed a number of prominent residences, hospitals, churches and schools in the Maryland-Washington, D. C. area. These included the War-Risk Insurance Building in Washington (1912-1920), and the Sanitarium for Tubercular Patients in Sabillasville, Maryland.

- 3. <u>Builders, contractors, suppliers</u>: Not available. Since this building was constructed originally as a U. S. Post Office and Courthouse, this information may be available in U.S. Government files. The architectural plans were approved on October 17, 1898 by James Knox Taylor, Supervising Architect, Treasury Department.
- 4. <u>Original plans and construction</u>: A newspaper article entitled "New Post Office Has Begun Business" appeared in Norfolk's <u>Virginian-Pilot</u> on December 2, 1900. A description of the structure's original appearance, taken from that article, is excerpted below:
 - "Norfolk's new federal building is finished. It is a beautiful edifice, wonderfully adapted to the purpose for which it was designed. Every detail of necessity, convenience and comfort seems to have been so thoroughly looked after that there is practically nothing to be desired. Not only every necessity has been provided for, but even many luxuries have been secured without interfering with the usefulness of the building or improving the beauty of the building. It is a complete courthouse and post office.
 - "The elevator is not in yet, and there are some other details still unfinished, but they do not affect either the appearance or the use of the building...
 - "...The architecture is Italian renaissance style, modified to American ideas of grace and by the necessities of the materials. The exterior is simple, almost severe, but still in pleasing proportions. The walls are of yellow tinted brick, faced with Indiana limestone of a light gray tint. This stone is ornamented with carvings of classic ornament. It is three stories high, with a basement of a ten-foot pitch. It stands as the first of a group of fine buildings to be gathered at Plume and Atlantic Streets ...
 - "...There is a grand entrance on Plume Street through massive wroughtiron gates, ornamented with a wreath and the monogram of Uncle Sam,
 into a small arched rotunda of exquisitely polished Sienna marble.
 From that the visitor goes into the spacious corridor and stands in
 front of the general delivery windows of the postoffice. To the
 right are the money-order windows and a little private room, fitted
 with the convenience necessary for the patrons of that department,

especially the ladies. To the left and around the Atlantic Street front of the building, the same corridor extends showing the lock boxes and delivery windows for Sunday use all the way to the Atlantic Street entrance...

- "...The corridors have Mosaic floors, with white mottled Italian marble extending up the side walls ten feet. At the end of this corridor are the stairway, the elevator shaft, the entrance for employees to the mailing rooms, the offices of the postmaster and his assistant. These are in the order named...
- "...The whole of the first floor is devoted to the postoffice. Inside of the boxes there is every convenience for handling letters and papers, packages and money with convenience and safety...
- "...They [Railway Mail Clerks] are provided for in the building, however. There are three rooms devoted to their use on the third floor, in the northwestern corner. There are a sitting room and two dormitories. These dormitories have every convenience of the toilet, even to a shower bath of hot and cold water. There are cots and a quiet and airy place for them to sleep. This service is subject to the exigencies of railway travel. They are likely to arrive here at all hours of the night, hence it is a great convenience to have a comfortable sleeping place and a bath ready at all times, day or night, for their use...
- "...On the second floor there is (sic) same marble corridors and mosaic floors. There is no wood anywhere except the heavy oak doors and the frames in which they are set. The veins of the marble meet and match so that there are many pretty designs in the natural shadings of the stone. The marble is relined by base and pilasters of faience. There is a new kind of material made at South Amboy, N.J., of clay. It is burned twice so as to assume a vitrified color, blended, that makes it very serviceable in the mechanical and decorative scheme of such a building. This shows to peculiar advantage in the cortile which admits the light from above in the postoffice, and which, with its columns on four sides and faience ornaments about the balustrade, is the architectural and artistic feature of the building...
- "...The court room is in the southwest of the second floor. It extends to the roof. It is light, well ventilated and possesses admirable acoustic properties. It is a beautiful, spacious room, thoroughly adapted to the service and dignity of a court of justice. It contains a bench for the judge, tables, chairs and ample space for the attorneys, desks for the clerk and marshal, raised seats for the jurymen and the witness and 200 seats and a gallery for spectators...
- "...Across the corridor from the courtroom, on the Atlantic Street front, are the rooms of the clerk. They are carpeted and furnished handsomely. There are oak desks, book cases, files for papers, vaults and toilets. Adjoining the court room are the private apartments of the judge. There he can have his books and papers for examination and the quiet and seclusion that are necessary for the consideration of the problem of or the plots of the lawyers...

- "...Adjoining the judge's is (sic) the district attorney's apartments in the northwestern corner of the second floor. These rooms are elegantly fitted and furnished and are equally accessible to the clerk, the judge, the grand jury and the courtroom...
- "...The third floor has an entrance to the gallery of the courtroom, the petit jury, the marshal's apartments, the law library, which has been donated to the use of the Norfolk and Portsmouth Bar Association, and the railway mail clerk's dormitory. There is an ornamental balustrade to the cortile, showing the pillars below and the vaulted roof and skylight above from this floor...
- "...The library is fitted with heavy oak book cases in an alcove arrangement, which will contain many thousands of volumes...
- "...A new feature of the postoffice is a secret passage. This is intended for the use of the secret service agents of the department of Washington. It is so arranged on the inside that there is a sort of tower springing from the basement, into which the inspectors go at will and stay as long as they please without the knowledge of anyone in the postoffice. It is intended to serve as an observation tower. The inspector, himself unseen, can see every person at work in the postoffice, at any time, day or night. His presence is absolutely unknown but he can see the carriers as they come and go; the clerks at their cases, and even the special messenger boys pitching pennies at idle moments in the basement...
- "...The basement is clean and dry. It is used by the letter carriers.
 They enter and leave the office by a stone stairway leading to the basement on the west side of the building from Plume Street. They have a lavatory and a large 'swing room.' The latter is the place where they rest and find recreation during the intervals of carrying the letters...
- "Other parts of the basement are used for the boilers and the heating and ventilating apparatus and for the storage of coal...
- "...There are several new features, among which may be mentioned the hard but noiseless floors. One of these is in the courtroom. It is called terrazzo mosaic any one may guess what that is. Another is the dormitory, with cots and bath for the railway mail clerks; also the electric clocks corrected from Washington, the secret passage for the inspectors, and the beautiful faience ornaments on the side walls..."

Copies of the original building plans are available at the Norfolk City Hall, Department of Public Works.

5. Alterations and additions: The exterior of the building is essentially unchanged from its original appearance, except for the removal of the elaborate wrought-iron gates from the Plume Street entrance. It is not known when the gates were removed or where they were taken.

Alterations to the interior of the building were undertaken in 1937, 1952, 1954, 1955, and 1967. The 1937 alterations, which appear to have been the most extensive of the alterations, were described in a <u>Virginian-Pilot</u> article of September 1, 1937, excerpted below:

"Council Votes Funds to Fix New City Hall"

- "An appropriation of \$50,0DD for the renovation and remodelling of the old Post Office Building, Atlantic and Plume streets for a new city hall was voted by the City Council yesterday. The council previously had appropriated \$8,DDO to start the work, but City Manager Thompson, who asked for the new appropriation, said he felt it would be enough to complete the job...
- "...City Manager Thompson showed members of the council plans for the changes to be made in the building and how it will house present city offices when completed...
- "On the first floor the present corridor will be retained and on this floor will be the City Council chamber and the offices of the City Treasurer, Commissioner of Revenue, water division, Collector of Oglinquent Taxes and telephone exchange.
- "The old two-story high courtroom building, starting on the second floor, is to be eliminated. On the second floor will be the offices of the Department of Public Works, City Manager, City Attorney, City Clerk and central files.
- "On the third floor will be the Department of Public Welfare, the Board of Tax Assessors and Real Estate Agent, the License Inspectors, the Port Traffic Commission and the General Registrar. An office for Associate Justice John W. Eggleston, of the Supreme Court of Appeals, also is provided for in the new plans.
- "The basement is to be made waterproof and much of the mechanical billing work, printing, clinic and other work will be done here. There will also be large spaces for storage of records..."

A set of plans for the 1937 alterations, entitled "New Municipal Building," dated August 1937, is on file in the Norfolk Department of Public Works. These drawings were done by the Division of Construction in the Department of Public Works, City of Norfolk.

Copies of the 1952, 1954, 1955 and 1967 interior alteration plans are also on file in the Norfolk Department of Public Works. Plans for alterations to the second floor scheduled for June 1952, were drawn by Joseph B. Courtney, AIA. The May, 1954 plans, entitled "City Hall Building" were drawn by the Oepartment of Public Works. In 1955 drawings were done by A. Ray Pentecost, Jr., AIA, for a series of internal petition and room layout changes. Drawings for further alterations for the Social Service Bureau were done by Wilson B. Dodson, AIA, in December 1967.

HISTORICAL CONTEXT (PART B)

Ouring the period of its emergence as an international port, from 188D to World War I, Norfolk witnessed a substantial growth in both its population and development. Between 1880 and 1900, the city's population increased 112%, resulting in a vast building boom in the city center as well as in the surrounding county. As a direct consequence of this activity, the U.S. Government commissioned the Baltimore firm of Wyatt and Nolting to design a

new building for the city's post office and federal courts. Illustrative of the high architectural quality of buildings commissioned by the Federal government in this period, the edifice was designed in 1898 in the Neo-Palladian Revival style.

A local history, <u>History of Norfolk County</u>, <u>Virginia</u>, published in 1902, states that:

"...For many years the Norfolk Post Office has been maintained in its present location, the stately old government building on Main Street... The growth of Norfolk and consequently its postal business has been so great that new and enlarged quarters for the Post Office became imperative.

"To meet the demand the U. S. Government is now completing, at a cost of about \$350,000, a thoroughly modern, finely equipped Post Office building on Plume Street. This will be completed in the near future. The Post Office will then be removed to it and other branches of Uncle Sam's service will then monopolize the present public building..." (page 349).

The building was ready for occupancy by December 1900. On the night of November 31, 1900, the Post Office moved its operations from the Customs House on Main Street to the new building on Plume Street. A <u>Virginian-Pilot</u> article of December 2, 1900 described the move:

"The postoffice business stopped in the old building and began in the new last night. The last letter was postmarked at the Main street office at 7:48 o'clock last night; the first letter was postmarked in the new office, both by automatic machine, at 8:15 o'clock. There was an interval of just 27 minutes. That is the quickest time on record.

The first mail was received in the new office by the Chesapeake and Ohio railroad at 8 o'clock. All the mails last night were delivered there...

"...So starts the new postoffice. The courts will start tomorrow."

By 1915 the building was inadequate to serve the growing needs of the Federal government. A "committee of prominent citizens visited Washington to point out to the Treasury Department that the business of the Post Office and the courts had outgrown this building and to plead for a new one." (Wertenbaker and Schlegel, p. 341). Not until the 1930's however, were funds finally appropriated for a larger federal building. On October 20, 1934, the new U. S. Courthouse and Post Office Building between Bute Street and Brambleton Avenue, was occupied. The move to this new building left the building on Plume Street unoccupied.

At the January 14, 1936 meeting of Council, the City Manager informed the Council that he was considering the possible acquisition of the old Post Office Building for use as a municipal building. On February 16, 1937, the City Manager reported to Council by letter that the U.S. Treasury would consider an offer from the City for the building. The <u>Virginian-Pilot</u> reported the meeting as follows:

"City Manager Thompson yesterday was instructed by the City Council to continue negotiations with the U. S. Treasury Department looking to the purchase of the Old Post Office Building at Atlantic and Plume Streets, and to ascertain what it will cost to renovate and alter the building for use as a city hall and to assign various City government agencies to space in the building. The City can buy the property for \$32,880...

"It was announced last week that the Treasury Oepartment had completed its appraisal of the Old Post Office property at \$65,760 and that, under the law, the City could buy it for half of the appraised value...

"As happened when the price was announced, Members of the Council expressed approval of the City's plan to acquire the building for a new city hall." (February 17, 1937, p. 18).

One month later on March 11, 1937, the Council authorized the City Manager to buy the building for \$32,880, which was appropriated and an issuance of bonds was authorized. The March 12 Virginian-Pilot reported that:

"Norfolk was assured of a change in city halls yesterday when the City Council in a special adjourned session appropriated \$32,880 to buy the Old Post Office Building, Atlantic and Plume Streets, authorized a bond issue for this amount and gave authority for the City Manager to offer this sum to the Secretary of the Treasury and for Mayor Taylor and City Clerk Corbell to execute a contract and deed to consummate the deal...

"Plans for the transferring of city offices into the building, after it is renovated and remodelled, still are tentative, but they call for a transfer of all city offices now housed in the old City Hall and the old telephone building to the other building.

"The City long has been negotiating for acquisition of the old Post Office Building and site for a new city hall. Former Representative Colgate W. Oarden, Jr., assisted city officials in these negotiations for two or three years..."

On August 31, 1937, \$50,000 was appropriated for remodelling the building, \$8,000 having been appropriated previously. \$20,000 more was appropriated on February 1, 1938. (Source: Files in the Norfolk Department of City Planning.)

By the middle of April 1938, the renovations to the building were virtually completed and the move begun. The Department of Public Works and the City Attorney were the first to occupy their new quarters, on April 16th. The City Treasurer, moved with the Commissioner of Revenue on April 24th. By the end of April the move was complete except for the laboratories of the Health Oepartment, which did not move until August 10th. (Source: Files in the Norfolk Oepartment of City Planning.)

On April 26, 1938 the City Council met for the first time in the Council Chambers of the "new" City Hall. From 1938 to 1952, no major changes were made in the arrangement of the building. The growing need for more room was met by the expulsion to other buildings of some departments and the contrac-

tion of those remaining into smaller quarters. (Source: Files in the Norfolk Department of City Planning.)

In 1965, City offices were moved to a new building. This building served as the offices of the Division of Social Services until 1977. It has been vacant since that time. The public use restriction was released by the General Services Administration on July 17, 1980. The City now plans to sell the structure to a Richmond developer who is currently working on its conversion into a restaurant.

PART II: ARCHITECTURAL INFORMATION

A DESCRIPTION OF EXTERIOR:

The general plan of the building is an irregular rectangle, so shaped to conform to the irregular street plan and resulting corner lot size. The building occupies its entire lot, being built out to the street. It is a distinctly urban structure, maintaining itself as a visually dominant element in a tight commercial area.

The Palladian-inspired structure has rusticated stone facing on the first story and Flemish-bond yellow brick with stone quoining on the second and third stories. A full entablature with a parapet wall of yellow brick crowns the edifice.

The facade is broken by a central pedimented engaged portico that contains the main entrance on the street level. The entry consists of a rusticated semicircular-arched opening with a foliated keystone and flanking carved stone cartouches. A shallow stone balcony supported by carved Corinthian-style paired consoles is directly above the entrance. The entry contains a transom-light double doorway with wood-frame glass doors topped by a semicircular transom. A glass pane has the painted words "City Hall." The doorway is approached by stone steps flanked by stone plinths with bronze lamp standards and rounded, translucent glass globes. On the second and third stories the pavilion has four engaged Roman Ionic columns that support a full pediment. A stone shield carved with stars and stripes and set in foliated ornament embellishes the tympanum. Side entrances are also found in semicircular rusticated arched openings; the entrance on the east elevation is flanked by bronze lamp standards on stone plinths.

The building is distinguished by a variety of fenestration treatments. The facade, like all the elevations, has rusticated semicircular-arched windows on the first story. The second-story openings are rectangular. The openings within the pavilion have pedimented stone heads supported by consoles and containing cartouches in the tympanum. The flanking windows also have cornice window heads supported by consoles, a treatment repeated on the rest of the second-story openings. The third-story openings are square and are framed by crossetted architraves. All openings have French-style casement windows. A stone entablature with a modillion and dentil cornice runs the perimeter of the roof line. (Source: National Register Application, 1981.)

B. DESCRIPTION OF INTERIOR:

The Old Norfolk City Hall's interior survives in an excellent state of preservation. The original plans, drawn in 1898, called for the post office

and related services on the first floor. The second floor housed the U.S. Courtroom and its related offices; the third floor contained the courtroom gallery, marshal offices, and a dormitory for the railway mail services. While the use of the spaces has changed throughout the years, the exceptional detailing in the public areas remains.

After the City obtained the building in 1937, the post office space on the first floor was converted into the City Treasurer's offices. Minimal alterations were necessary, and much original fabric survives. The area is distinguished by wood paneling that flanks glass and metal-grilled openings originally used by the post office for customer services. The surrounding walls in the hall have marble-veneer facing and stone paved floors. Many of the offices retain their original paneled doors. The hall ceiling is vaulted.

The second floor is distinguished by an open court. The court is framed by an arcade that has marble columns with lonic capitals topped by an elaborately ornamented plaster-work cornice. A balustrade with classically turned balusters runs between the columns. Like the first floor, the second-floor hall ceiling is vaulted and has marble facing and stone paving. space and office space on the second floor have undergone considerable alteration; however, current plans call for the restoration of the mezzanine area around the court. The offices on the third floor are arranged around the court opening. The floor has a blind arcade that runs the perimeter of the mezzanine area. The arcade has crossetted architraves that frame the office openings alternating with marble tablets. Round medallions are found above the architraves. The coffered ceiling has ornamental plasterwork that includes a Greek fret and egg-and-dart ornamentation. The skylight is embellished by a plaster cornice featuring a geometric motif and a classically inspired anthemion motif. Upon the City's acquisition of the building, the third floor was altered to accomodate municipal offices. (Source: National Register Application, 1981)

C. SITE:

The Old Norfolk City Hall is located at 235 East Plume Street in the City of Norfolk. The property consists of the building and a small area to the south and west, occupying a total area of 23,050.81 sq. ft. and listed in the Norfolk City Deed Book as #1459. It encompases 135.70' on Plume Street (north), 151.70' on Atlantic Street (east), 143.07' on a private lane (south), and 187.07' to the west. It is the same area that was turned over to the City of Norfolk when it acquired the property from General Services Administration of the U.S. Government in 1937. The site is not landscaped.

PART III: SOURCES OF INFORMATION

A. ARCHITECTURAL DRAWINGS:

1. Original drawings by Wyatt and Nolting, dated September 12, 1898. Approved October 17, 1898 by James Knox Taylor, Supervising Architect, Treasury Department. This appears to be a full set of drawings including facade elevations, interior plans, mechanical systems and so forth. Filed with the Department of Public Works, City of Norfolk.

- 2. "New Municipal Building" interior alteration plans. Drawn by Division of Construction, Department of Public Works, dated August, 1937. Filed with Department of Public Works, City of Norfolk.
- 3. "City Hall Building" interior alterations. Drawings by Joseph Courtney, AIA, dated June 1952. Filed with Department of Public Works, City of Norfolk.
- 4. "City Hall Building", interior alterations. Drawings by Department of Public Works, dated May, 1954. Filed with Department of Public Works, City of Norfolk.
- 5. "Alterations to City Hall". Plans dated February 7, 1955 and drawn by A. Ray Pentecost, Jr., AIA. Filed with Department of Public Works, City of Norfolk.
- 6. "Alterations to City Hall". Plans drawn by Wilson B. Dodson II, AIA, and dated December 1967. Filed with Department of Public Works, City of Norfolk.

B. EARLY VIEWS:

- Photograph taken about 1909. No further identification. Available at Sargeant Memorial Room, Kirn Library, Norfolk.
- 2. Photograph taken between 1906 and 1922. H. C. Mann collection. Available at Sargeant Memorial Room, Kirn Library, Norfolk. Copying by permission only.
- 3. Photograph from an old post card, taken about 1910. Available at Sargeant Memorial Room, Kirn Library, Norfolk.
- Two photographs taken about 1949. From Emerson collection. Available at Sargeant Memorial Room, Kirn Library, Norfolk.

C. BIBLIOGRAPHY:

1. Primary Sources:

None.

2. Secondary Sources:

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- b) Virginian-Pilot, September 1, 1937, p. 18.
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- d) Stewart, William H. <u>History of Norfolk County, Virginia</u>. Chicago, Illinois: Biographical Publishing Company, 1902.

- e) Wertenbaker, Thomas, and Schlegel, Marvin. Norfolk: Historic Southern Port. Second edition. Durham, N. C.: Duke University Press, 1962.
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- h) Files in the Norfolk Department of City Planning.
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 Company, 1956. pp. 674-5, 443-4.
- j) The Journal of the American Institute of Architects, 1926, Volume 14, p. 238.
- k) Architectural Forum, January 1941. Volume 74, p. 56.
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- m) Baltimore: Its History and Its People. New York, N.Y.: Lewis Historical Publishing Company, 1912. Volume 3, p. 780-781.
- n) Steiner, Bernard C. Men of Mark in Maryland: Biographies of Leading Men in the State. Washington, D. C.: Johnson-Wynne Company, 19D7, Volume 1.
- o) Baltimore: The Gateway to the South, the Liverpool of America.
 Baltimore, Maryland: Mercantile Advancement Company, 1898.
- p) Who Was Who In America, 1897-1942. New York, N.Y.: A. N. Marquis Company, 1943, Volume 1.
- q) The Baltimore Engineer. Volume 15, No. 6. December 194D.
- r) The Baltimore Evening Sun. April 22, 1933.
- D. LIKELY SDURCES NOT YET INVESTIGATED:
- E. SUPPLEMENTAL MATERIAL:

Map showing locations of Norfolk City Halls: 1850 - present.

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